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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BANGKOK 002269

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [TH](#) [CH](#) [KIRF](#)
SUBJECT: FALUN GONG IN THAILAND

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission James F. Entwistle, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) Falun Gong (FLG) practitioners in Bangkok are a small mix of mainland Chinese seeking refugee status and resettlement to third countries, alongside a smattering of high-society Thais. Thai immigration authorities are strictly applying immigration law in cases involving FLG practitioners, which is possibly related to strengthening Thailand-China relations. A Chinese diplomat told us the RTG sometimes dumps undocumented Chinese FLG practitioners across neighboring countries' borders, although FLG practitioners and UNHCR officials with whom we spoke with did not indicate this practice takes place. FLG practitioners told us the authorities carry out sometimes intrusive surveillance of their public exercises, and visit their homes; the authorities have at times warned FLG practitioners against political activism. This activism, rather than practice of the FLG faith per se, appears to be the basis for RTG concern about the FLG community. UNHCR accepts the majority of most FLG adherents' claims to refugee status, assuming China will persecute even low-level FLG activists. End Summary.

FALUN GONG'S ROOTS IN BANGKOK

12. (C) Phaitun Surivawongphaisan and Apassaree Chaotechuang are native-born Thai citizens and the leaders of the Bangkok branch of Falun Gong (FLG). Apassaree, a member of the elite Royal Bangkok Sports Club, told PolOff that she joined FLG in 1996 after a Thai friend raved about the health benefits. She began to study FLG ideology to treat her migraines and told us she experienced instant relief as a result of the meditation exercises. Phaitun, a dentist who travels the world for FLG conferences, joined FLG in 1998 to ease health problems. He told us that it took only one month of FLG study for his health to improve.

13. (C) When Bangkok FLG practitioners first assembled, the group was composed of around 100 Thai members. They practiced in the CP Tower's cafeteria, a building named after a giant agricultural company belonging to the Sino-Thai Chearavanont family. A high-level manager of the CP company was a fellow practitioner and offered use of the space free of charge. He also invited FLG founder Li Hongzhi to Bangkok

in 1996 to meet the group. According to Apassaree, it was Li Hongzhi's only visit to Bangkok before the "persecution" against FLG started in China in 1998. Apassaree told us that the CP Tower stopped hosting FLG meetings in 1998 due to the Chearavanont family's investments in China, and because the manager did not believe in the ideology of FLG, although he enjoyed the exercises. FLG practitioners moved to another building with donated office space until the 1998 Asian economic downturn caused the owner to evict them. At that time, Li Hongzhi advised the group to relocate to Bangkok's Lumpini Park where they continue to meet daily between 6:00 - 8:00 a.m.

14. (C) Today, 100 FLG refugees from mainland China outnumber the remaining 20 Thai members, who tend to be wealthy housewives and a few businessmen, such as the owner of a cargo shipping company. Apassaree told us that the number of Thai FLG members dropped in the late 1990s in conjunction with China's persecution of FLG. She said Thai practitioners worried about being targeted by the RTG and that Sino-Thais and overseas Chinese felt particular pressure from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) not to affiliate with groups considered anti-CCP, such as FLG. Recalling the climate around July 1999, Apassaree said that the PRC Embassy routinely called Sino-Thais and overseas Chinese who had investments connected to China, warning them not to associate with FLG. Phaitun said that many Thai politicians have invested in China, and they view these interests as more important than human rights.

15. (C) The draw of FLG to Thailand may be linked to its

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overland access to China, although the UNHCR presence is also a factor. Some mainland Chinese FLG refugees told us that they escaped to Thailand due to its proximity to China. One mainland Chinese FLG practitioner said the U.S. Embassy in Beijing advised FLG members to escape to Thailand in order to seek UNHCR protection. (Comment: We do not know the basis for this claim but pass it along because there may be consequences associated with this surely-unfounded rumor. End Comment.) Yao Wen, a senior member of the PRC Embassy's political section, told us FLG's presence in Thailand could be attributed to religious factors. He said that FLG practitioners choose Thailand because of the group's close association with Buddhism. According to Yao, attempts by FLG to link itself with Buddhism angered some Thais, who find it offensive to their form of Buddhism. He added that an NGO (NFI) was involved in bringing FLG practitioners from China to Thailand.

NEWFOUND FREEDOM LEADS TO PRC EMBASSY

16. (C) In addition to exercising in Lumpini Park, some FLG members, primarily those from mainland China, distribute pamphlets and other material around tourist sites in Bangkok and the PRC Embassy. One practitioner said her group wanted to educate the many Chinese tourists in Bangkok, as well as Thais, about the persecution of FLG in China, including organ harvesting. "Most of us know people who were killed, tortured to death," she said and then told PolOff she saw two FLG women tortured until they were paralyzed during her imprisonment in a Guangzhou women's labor camp (Chatou Nuzi Laojiaosu, Guangzhou).

17. (C) FLG Bangkok members also meditate every Friday for two hours in front of the PRC embassy. According to Apassaree, "the problem starts when the refugees join us." She said that the police simply take those with valid Thai visas to the police station and register them. However, those with only UN cards showing their refugee status are arrested and sent to the Immigration Detention Center (IDC). On March 13 and 14, 2008 a total of six mainland Chinese FLG members were arrested while distributing FLG leaflets near the Chinese

Embassy and the Grand Palace. On February 8, 2008, 13 Chinese FLG members were arrested while meditating opposite the PRC Embassy. At present, 19 FLG members remain in Bangkok's IDC.

18. (C) PRC diplomat Yao Wen told us he recognizes some of the FLG practitioners who regularly sit opposite his embassy. He said that he was not concerned about FLG members becoming violent, saying they know well that the RTG authorities would not tolerate such behavior. He told us that the Thai police are "very kind" towards the Chinese Embassy and will remove the protestors, sometimes arresting them and, if they did not have legal status, pushing them across the border into Burma or Laos -- although Yao Wen noted that many of those treated thusly made their way back to Thailand a few weeks later. FLG members, especially the protestors, were well known to Thai intelligence services, who watched them carefully, Yao said. When asked whether FLG members were repatriated to China, Yao indicated they were not. He said many of them did not have any documents, and their practice was often to refuse to speak to government authorities, so it was impossible to determine their nationality, and consequently the Thais simply pushed them across the border of a neighboring country. Senior Regional Protection Officer at UNHCR Maria Corinna Miguel-Quicho told PolOff separately that the PRC is not responsive in claiming PRC people as nationals -- "they'll never do it," she said.

19. (C) Chen Hua, a 36 year old female refugee who has been in Thailand for two years, was in the first group to meditate outside of the PRC Embassy. In October 2005, the group sat in the lotus position for two hours, until members of the Special Branch Police (SBP) threatened them with arrest. "Every arrest happens when there is something important for China, such as the Olympics," she said, noting that the SBP has interviewed the landlords of most FLG refugees.

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RTG ACTS ON PRC EMBASSY CONCERNS

110. (C) Thai FLG founders Phaitun and Apassaree both told us the Thai police photographed them and their homes when Thailand hosted the APEC Summit in October 2003. Phaitun said that "they told me they wanted to recognize me and make sure that we don't make Thailand lose face." According to Apassaree, the Thai police also take intrusive photos of each FLG member's face when they meditate opposite the PRC Embassy on public property. FLG refugees told us that Thai security guards from a nearby office high-rise close to the PRC Embassy sometimes appear instead of the police to take their photos. (Note: Two Lumpini Park security guards sat on a bench next to the group of FLG mainland Chinese refugees while the refugees discussed their experiences with us. End Note.)

111. (C) Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Attache and China specialist Tajasarn Hanhiran told us that the RTG does not consider FLG's presence in Bangkok to be a major problem or threat to bilateral relations with China. MFA Third Secretary Suwannee Niamyai who also specializes on mainland China, told us that "China understands us -- that Thailand will do anything not to break down relations." Attention paid by both the PRC Embassy and the RTG to the FLG presence in Bangkok around the arrival of the Olympic torch earlier this year is noteworthy. Phaitun told us a friend of his who works in the Government House told him that the Chinese Ambassador warned officials at Government House about a possible FLG bomb during the torch relay in Bangkok.

112. (C) Phaitun noted that he was called three times by different SBP officers who asked him if FLG intended to join forces with the Free Tibet crowd at the torch relay. Apassaree added that the SBP called her and expressed their concern that Thailand "not lose face" during the torch's run

through Bangkok. UNHCR Protection Officer Seda Kuzucu was also on high-alert prior to the torch relay. She said that she reminded the FLG "to calm down or we'd have to see them in IDC," where access to detainees is limited to one hour per day. Phaitun told us that the FLG group never went to the torch relay and that Bangkok FLG members tried to contact Thai media and Chinese-language newspapers in Bangkok in order to clarify FLG's stance on the Olympics. Apassaree noted the papers always refused FLG press releases, not wanting to be seen as anti-China or to lose advertising from mainland China. MFA official Tajasarn told us that "FLG themselves are not a problem in Thailand, but they protest against the Chinese government, and we accepted international principles not to allow other groups to use Thailand as a place to protest and worsen our relations with a third party."

WARY OF PRC, UNHCR GRANTS REFUGEE STATUS

¶13. (C) UNHCR in Bangkok has 77 active FLG refugee cases consisting of 111 people, and 36 asylum-seeker cases consisting of 50 people. UNHCR Senior Regional Protection Officer Maria Corinna Miguel-Quicho told us that UNHCR has not seen a recent increase in FLG cases in Thailand and suspected that most FLG members from mainland China traveled directly to North America and Europe to seek asylum. She told us that most of the cases seen in Bangkok were relatives of people already resettled in third countries and she viewed them as "low-key" FLG practitioners. She questioned the extent of their involvement with FLG in China, noting that once they come to Bangkok they go straight to the PRC Embassy, because engaging in FLG exercises there is the most effective way to gain refugee status. She explained that most FLG practitioners in Bangkok are 'sur place refugees,' meaning they had no well-founded fear of persecution when they left China, and this well-founded fear only materialized after they arrived in Thailand and took on a more active role in protesting PRC policies. UNHCR Protection Officer Seda Kuzucu noted that if a FLG applicant is rejected after their first UNHCR interview "they'll join the group in Lumpini Park and sit in front of the PRC embassy."

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¶14. (C) UNHCR considered FLG cases to be among the more difficult cases to review because of a lack of information on China's treatment of low-level FLG practitioners. Miguel-Quicho also spoke of the difficulty of verifying FLG applicants' stories due to UNHCR's inability to access sources in China. She was particularly skeptical of FLG applicants who arrived in Bangkok on commercial flights with PRC passports and i.d. cards, which Chinese nationals who were imprisoned or pursued by the police should not have been able to obtain easily. Nevertheless, throughout the region, most FLG practitioners are being recognized as refugees due to a lack of resources in China to verify their accounts and due to China's poor human rights record.

¶15. (C) UNHCR recognizes 90% of FLG cases, and UNHCR staff had not heard of any FLG being returned to mainland China or other border countries, contrary to Yao's statement. Miguel-Quicho told us that UNHCR seeks to err on the side of caution, given the realistic possibility that FLG practitioners, who she acknowledged are monitored by the PRC Embassy in Thailand, would face persecution if returned to China. Tangentially, Kuzucu noted that the rare rejection of a FLG practitioner's request generally would prompt an active international lobbying effort on that person's behalf. She did not consider the RTG to be particularly harsh towards FLG refugees. However, both Miguel-Quicho and Kuzucu pointed to a distinct pattern of refugee arrests by the Thai authorities over the past two years when arrests spiked in December, July and right before the Thai New Year in April. They speculated that this reflected concerns over security during peak tourism seasons for Thailand, but they did not know if that pattern of arrests indicated an internal policy.

COMMENT

¶16. (C) FLG's presence in Bangkok is relatively small, but the community's political activism makes it a disproportionate concern for the PRC Embassy and RTG officials seeking to protect and promote the Thai-Chinese relationship. We are concerned by the PRC diplomat's allegation that the RTG shunts undocumented FLG practitioners across Thailand's borders, but we noted that neither the FLG adherents nor the UNHCR officials to whom we spoke confirmed that this practice takes place. Although the FLG community has not received formal recognition by the RTG's Religious Affairs Department, FLG members appear free to practice their faith, and do so openly. Our assessment is that the RTG surveillance, which at times may rise to the level of harassment, is based principally on FLG practitioners' political activities (anti-PRC protests), rather than their religious beliefs, and in most cases foreign FLG practitioners who lack the legal right to be present in Thailand are treated properly under Thai law.

JOHN